

GRACIOUS, KIND, AND NURTURING

Family and Friends Remember Debra "Debbie" Adamous

By Matt Beardmore



She was his everything. His wife, his confidant, the mother of his two children, his accountant, his secretary for their real estate business, the woman who for four-plus decades prepared his lunch and gave him a hug goodbye before he went off to work at Kansas City VA Medical Center as a medical technologist. But she's gone now. And so is the laughter in their Overland Park home.

Since Debra Adamous lost a seven-week battle with pancreatic cancer on December 17, 2022, all that is left for Joseph Adamous are stories from the countless people Debra opened their home to over the years, old photos and songs, and other reminders of their 40-plus-year relationship in their home which he has no plan on leaving. And then there's also Debra's voice, which you can still hear if you call Joseph's cell phone or home number and you're directed to voicemail.

"I think that's the only voice recording I have from her," Joseph said. "I know other people have brought it to my attention – I guess I should be working on taking it off."

Maybe he will one day, but for now, Joseph is just trying to find his way.

"I'm still lost," he said. "My life has been turned upside down, that's for sure."

Born July 5, 1953, Debra found Joseph in 1979 at a panel discussion conducted by a professor of history at University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC). Debra, who had already earned a Bachelor of Arts in History from UMKC, was in the audience. Joseph, then a student at Avila University, was a panelist.

It didn't take long after their first meeting and first dinner at the home of Debra's parents, Rita and Bernard Tenenbaum, for Joseph and Debra to figure out they were meant for each other.

"We had a courtship for a few months and then we mutually came to the conclusion that there was a lot in common and we liked each other and we would be a good match together," Joseph said.



Debra and Joseph were married in 1979 at the synagogue where Debra belonged at the time, Congregation Beth Israel Abraham and Voliner (BIAV) in Overland Park. The party took place at Joseph's synagogue, Kehilath Israel (K.I.), where he now serves as president.

Debra and Joseph had two children, Josh, 33, who recently moved to the San Antonio area



"We had a courtship for a few months and then we mutually came to the conclusion that there was a lot in common and we liked each other and we would be a good match together."

for work, and Rochelle, 21, who still lives in Overland Park and attends Johnson County Community College. Debra was a grandmother to Desi, Eli, Mimi, Bella, and Geneva. She never got the chance to meet Josh and his wife Jennifer's sixth child, Oliver Isaiah Adamous, who was born on June 28, but by anyone who knew her, Debra would have been a wonderful grandmother to Oliver as well.

"She was the typical grandmother," said Debra's friend of 30-plus years, Maureen Minoofar. "She would always have treats in the fridge or whatever the kids would want – Debbie was someone who always took care of everybody. Always."

Debra always kept the family's front door open, whether it was for friends in need of a place to stay or something to eat, someone from the synagogue who required accommodations, or for Debra's father Bernard, a Holocaust survivor from Poland who moved in with the family after Rita died and was taken care of by Debra and Joseph until he passed.

Debra was there again with open arms as she and Joseph opened their home to Joseph's then 10-year-old nephew Michael Gouel, whose parents brought him to the United States from Iran.

Michael lived with Joe and Debra for several years.

"(Debbie) provided pretty much everything for me for three years – house, food, laundry, upkeep, insurance, medical care –



that's who she was," Michael said. "No matter who that person was, family, relative, stranger, someone from the synagogue – she didn't mind. She would nurture, and not just give food and shelter. But also nurture in every possible way, as far as being Jewish, living a Jewish life, about righteousness. "I've never met anyone like her and I don't think I ever will," he added. "She will be missed, and she is."

That's exactly how Cristina Gillom, Debra's long-time friend, feels.

"I was gifted with the unconditional love and friendship of this beautiful woman. She was a soul sister - always nurturing and supportive," Cristina said. "We connected eternally. We prayed and cheered for each other and laughed until our stomach hurt, which made the hard times easier and the easier times more fun! I'll cherish our friendship and every memory she left for me in this world. While my memories of Debbie are too numerous to count, the one thing about Debbie that sticks out most in my mind is that at the end of EVERY conversation we had, she always said, 'Thank you' - no matter what we talked about. Debbie found gratitude in the simplest moments, and I've learned to do the same through her."

Maureen said Debbie also learned from her parents how to be courteous and greet people.

"I'm not kidding you - she would even befriend the clerk at Walmart or people at the bank," Maureen said.

Debbie's ability to connect with people from all backgrounds and walks of life was evident as there was a steady flow of visitors to her room as she was admitted to Menorah Hospital and then to the University of Kansas Hospital in December after being diagnosed with pancreatic cancer a month earlier.

"She could have been in pain when people came to visit, but she was still gracious and always thanked people for coming," Maureen said.



Many of the people who visited were from K.I., where Maureen said Debbie was a "huge part of our synagogue and our family there."

In the last decade or so, Debbie became really involved at K.I., said Joseph, who has been a

member there since he arrived in the U.S. exactly 50 years ago. "She was instrumental in restarting the women's group called WoKI, which stands for Women of K.I."

"Interestingly, we also had a pet (Shih Tzu) at home whose name was Wookie, which was named after the Wookies from Star Wars," Joseph said.

Speaking of movies, the movie business also played an important role in Debra's life as she worked at AMC Theatres for 28 years in the engineering department, making sure all the materials, communications equipment, and all the requirements for the engineers were in place for the company's newly-built theatres.

Debra loved her job and taking the early commute with her father, who also worked downtown.

"She was a very conscientious and serious employee," Joseph said. "The emphasis on conscientious."

Debra also knew how to have fun and relax - one such activity she truly enjoyed was watching, and passionately cheering for, the Kansas City Chiefs. "I grew up with soccer -

(American) football wasn't as important

for me," Joseph said, laughing. "She would be so enthusiastic. When they made points or lost the ball, she would be screaming and I'd say, 'It's just a game.' She would say, 'You don't understand.'"

What Joseph has come to understand in the months since Debra's passing is how much she meant to him.

"Now that unfortunately she's gone, I think I underappreciated her, with the emphasis on 'under,'" Joseph said. "Unfortunately, until a tragedy strikes, we don't appreciate life as much as we should."

When Debra starting showing symptoms back in October, there was initially no indication that her condition was terminal as Joseph said she was at first "diagnosed differently." When the pain wouldn't go away and Debra was looked at again, the imaging was not interpreted right, Joseph said. "We went through so many doctors and tests - you didn't know what stage she was at,"



he added. "I was hoping there were all sorts of treatments, chemotherapy, radiation therapy, etc."

However, just seven weeks after first showing symptoms, Debra was gone. Joseph struggles when he tells you his last words to Debra were that he loved her, and that her last words to him while she slightly moved her lips and squeezed his hand was that she loved him, too.

Joseph spent every night at the hospital with Debra, and he would only leave to check and feed their dog, or run errands, but he was not in the room when Debra took her final breath. Joseph had gone to the airport to pick up Michael, who has lived in the Los Angeles area for the past three decades, along with Michael's brother Sami and their cousin, Navid. When they arrived at Debra's hospital room, Maureen had to break the news.

"In the Persian culture, it's a little bit different as far as you don't come out immediately and say somebody died," Maureen said. "I needed to be sensitive."

There has been plenty of grieving during the months that have passed since Debra left her friends and family.

"What's hard is when we get together we don't have the laughter (that we had) when Debbie was here," Maureen said. "And I

don't know if we're all just at the point where we are. Will it come back? I don't know... that's what I miss. I miss Passover - we shared all the holidays together. She'd know what stores to go to - I could always call and say, "Where did you get this?"

Joseph has 43 years of wonderful memories with Debra, so he's still unsure of how long the grieving process is going to last and when he's going to be ready to move forward without his wife by his side.

"I don't really know," Joseph said. "Right now, I'm trying to deal with my grief. I haven't thought about any future life decisions."



That doesn't mean those closest to him won't be trying to remind Joseph of how short life is and how every day is so valuable, even if his life partner isn't there any longer to brighten up the room.

"I have Joe over for dinner on Friday nights and it's just hard to pick up and continue without Debbie," Maureen said. "You miss the laughter and the good times - we won't get these back, and we're constantly reminded of this void. But I guess now I'm beginning to think I need to convey this to Joe. Debbie loved life and she would want us to have a full life."

Debbie surely had one, even though it ended far too soon.

